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ABSTRACT

To examine the relative effectiveness of the language experience approach (LEA) as a means of motivating and teaching reading to behaviorally disordered students, two children were examined. Subjects were an 11-year-old (Jimmy) and an 8-year-old (Bobby), who were placed in a classroom with nine other children identified as emotionally disturbed. All LEA instruction took place in a special services room. After two topics of interest to the students were identified, illustrations were created and used to elicit the LEA stories. Each story served as an instructional base for a period of 4 days with each lesson scheduled for approximately 20 minutes. Two target behaviors were identified: (1) increased recognition of sight words taken from the Dolch Word List and from the LEA stories, and (2) the ability to correctly complete modified cloze sentences at the end of each story. Results showed that while both subjects learned LEA sight words, they neither retained recognition of all new sight words introduced nor retained mastery of all words recognized immediately following instruction. Over all, Jimmy showed the greatest and most consistent growth in sight word learning. While both gave evidence of the ability to predict deleted words in the cloze sentences, Bobby performed this task with greater accuracy and exhibited more consistent use of context and understanding of the task demands. Conversely, Jimmy performed poorly over all. Both students exhibited less disruptive behavior and showed an increased attention to the LEA tasks. (HOD)

Teaching Reading to Behaviorally Disordered Students: An Alternative Approach

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Teaching Reading to Behaviorally Disordered Students:

An Alternative Approach

The concomitant occurrence of behavioral/emotional disorders and deficient educational functioning has been well documented (Stephens, 1977; Bower, 1969). The nature of the relationship between academic achievement and emotional/behavioral problems, however, remains complex and interdependent (Dee, 1972; Newcomber, 1980; Pual & Epanchin, 1982). It has been maintained that when a child exhibits early and prolonged evidence of emotional distrubance, the probability of interference with intellectual development is greatly increased (Maloney & Wood, 1978). Frequently, behaviorally disordered children exhibit serious below average achievement even though IQ's may be within normal ranges (Kirk, 1979). Also, the higher the child's score on a conduct dimension of a behavioral checklist, the greater the reading retardation (Graubard, 1971). Often, students with behavioral problems either lack interest in school or feel inadequate with regard to achievement (Kauffmann, 1981). This lack of interest or inability to perform is frequently reflected in students' reading performance (Lipton, 1975).

Shea (1978) in discussing the relationship between academic achievement and emotional disorders states that cause and effect factors cannot be determined. Whether the emotional problem stems from poor school performance or whether the poor school performance is a result of an emotional problem is most frequently indeterminable. The fact still remains that these children have academic problems and should be receiving specialized educational treatment.

Since reading is central to success in traditional educational programs, it is imperative that effective teaching strategies be developed to teach reading to behaviorally disordered students. Simeonsson, Strenecky and Strenecky (1977) list a number of factors that may contribute to the high incidence of reading failure of these children including lack of attentiveness to appropriate stimuli, low energy

output, and lack of motivation. It would appear, therefore, that an approach which is motivational, encourages active participation by the student, assists the student in focusing attention and helps to control disruptive behavior warrants investigation. The Language Experience Approach to the teaching of reading meets these criteria.

Language Experience Approach

The Language Experience Approach (Ashton-Warner, 1963) is based upon a whole language model of reading in which reading is defined as the active process of constructing meaning from print. A language-based model of reading proposes that reading is a language activity sharing characteristics of the other language systems: writing, speaking, and listening (Goodman, 1970; Smith, 1973). Because these language systems share semantic and syntactic characteristics, the beginning reader can and should use his/her language skills which are acquired by 5 or 6 years of age when learning to read. Peculiar to the reading and writing systems is the grapho-phonic association between speech and print. In the process of learning to read, children learn to associate speech with print and coordinate what is heard in language with what is seen in print (Clay, 1977). It is this sound/symbol association which is novel to the students and creates the major difficulty in learning to read. The language-based model of reading advocates that natural text which preserves the semantic and syntactic characteristics of language be used. Further, that grapho-phonic associations be mastered through the use of predictable text in conjunction with the other langauge cues. The Language Experience Approach (LEA) is characterized by these features.

LEA uses the child's language as the text-base from which reading instruction proceeds. Children orally create a story as the teacher records it. Both teacher and students read through the story together several times. Through repeated readings of the story and instructional activities, the children learn to read individual words, phrases, and sentences both in and out of the context of the story. They learn to extract phonic rules and other word attack skills inductively.

That is, they cluster words together which contain similar orthographic patterns, discover their similarities and differences, then generalize these rules to other unknown words. The advantage of this approach over other conventional approaches is that the children are already familiar with the content, highly motivated to read their own ideas, and develop a concept of print as written langauge. Further, this approach capitalizes on the students' language competence which typically exceeds his/her reading ability in the early stages of reading development (Smith, 1973). Since the late 1960s, this apporach has been used extensively in kindergarcen and first grade classrooms as a beginning reading program (Lee & Allen, 1963). Thus, it seemed an appropriate technique to use with behaviorally disordered students acquiring beginning reading skills.

The purpose, therefore, of this investigation was to examine the relative effectiveness of the Language Experience Approach as a means of teaching reading to behaviorally disordered children. To date this particular approach has remained relatively unexplored as a viable alternative to traditional reading programs for behaviorally disordered students.

METHOD

Subjects. The two subjects in this study were brothers. They both attended a private residential/day treatment facility in an urban setting in upstate New York. Although specific diagnostic information was not available to the researchers, the children could be described as impulsive, immature, and easily distracted. Their lack of self control and impulsivity were the major reasons for their inability to function successfully in a public school setting. Both subjects were placed in a classroom with nine other children (ages 8-11 yrs.) identified as emotionally disturbed/behaviorally disbrdered. Both were also receiving 1/2 hour of remedial reading instruction each day. In addition, each attended speech therapy three times a week for sessions which lasted 1 1/2 hours. Remedial reading took place in

a special services room with small groups of children (2-3) of similar reading ability. Instruction was traditional in nature. Both the classroom teacher and remedial reading teacher used materials from the Ginn 720 : Basal Series (1976) along with games such as word bingo, concentration and phonic worksheets. Classroom reading instruction was typically conducted in a whole group setting. Small group instruction was occasionally used to emphasize specific reading skills and occurred only when students' behavior could be carefully controlled.

Subject I (Jimmy) was 11 years old. His teacher noted that he was essentially a non-reader; he knew a few sight words but had not learned any letter/sound correspondences. His reading and language development were assessed by the Metropolitan Achievement Test (1978). His performance on the test was K-5 for reading and K for language development. A pre-test assessing his mastery of sight words revealed that Jimmy could recognize 15 words from the Dolch Word List (Dolch, 1953). Subject II (Bobby) was 9 years old. His teacher noted that he too was a non-reader and lacked mastery of letter/sound correspondences. His scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT) were Pre-K for reading and K-8 for language. Bobby's pre-test results indicated that he could recognize six words from the Dolch List prior to the study.

While both subjects had limited reading and language skills, some differences between them were noted. Jimmy's reading scores on the MAT exceeded Bobby's by approximately five months. His sight word mastery also exceeded Bobby's. Conversely, Bobby's language scores exceeded Jimmy's by eight months as measured by the MAT. Prior to this study, Jimmy had received speech therapy for 2 1/2 years, while Bobby received this instruction for only one year.

Setting. All LEA instruction took place in a special services room at the residential/day treatment facility. The room was equipped with desks and a blackboard. In addition, The classroom teacher conducted all instruction as described in the procedure section.

Materials. Two topics of interest to the students were identified. Illustrations were then created and used to elicit the LEA stories. Both familiar (a collie, Spiderman) and unfamiliar (a platypus, the Red Tornado) pictures were used to identify possible response and learning differences due to content familiarity (Marr & Gormley, 1982). However, the stories which were elicited from the pictures did not differ substantially from one another (see Table 3). Sight word cards, sentence strips and modified cloze sentences (Bortnick & Lopardo, 1973) were constructed from each of the stories and used in the instructional lessons.

Procedures. Each story served as an instructional base for a period of four days with each lesson scheduled for approximately 20 minutes. A series of four sequential lessons were given for each story resulting in a total of 1 1/2 contact hours per story.

Lesson 1: This lesson consisted of a discussion of the picture by the students. Then, a Language Experience story was created and recorded on chart paper (Lee & Allen, 1963). The teacher and students read through the story together and separately several times until the students appeared able to read the story without assistance.

Lesson 2: First the story was reviewed. The teacher then introduced the sight words from the story one at a time. The teacher would display a word card, say the sight word, discuss its meaning, and then the read the word in the context of the story. The students then said the word and read it in context. At the end of the lesson, the sight words were reviewed. Thus, by way of teacher modeling and rehearsal, sight words were introduced and practiced.

Lesson 3: The story was reviewed as were the sight words. Then, sentences from the story were placed on strips of paper; the students were to read the strips of paper and order these strips to match the story. The entire story was then reread.

Lesson 4: The story was reviewed and practice was given reading particularly difficult vocabulary words. The children were then given a modified cloze worksheet (Bortnick & Lopardo, 1973); one key word was deleted from each sentence in the story.

The students were to read each aloud and complete the missing word in the sentence. The students were instructed to think about the story and try to select a word which was meaningful in the sentence. When all of the blanks were completed the children could check the LEA story to determine if their answers were correct. Before closing the lesson, the story was reviewed.

In sum, the Language Experience story was read and reviewed in four consecutive lessons. Sight words were identified and reviewed, practice was given ordering sentence strips and completing modified cloze sentences. The focus of instruction was on learning to read using the students' existing language skills. Throughout instruction, meaning was stressed at the sight word, sentence, and paragraph level (Allen & Allen, 1976).

Target Behavior. Two target behaviors were identified for this study. The first was increased recognition of sight words and the second was the ability to read sentences and use context clues to accurately complete four modified cloze passages.

The first target behavior was measured by asking students to read accurately a list of words taken from the Dolch Word List (1953) and from the LEA stories. Testing from the Dolch list was conducted at the conclusion of the study. Conversely, testing for mastery of the LEA sight words was provided at the end of each story (i.e. end of four consecutive lessons) and a comprehensive test was given at the close of the study. In this manner, increased word recognition and retention could be examined.

The second target behavior, the ability to correctly complete modified cloze sentences, was assessed at the end of each story. This task required that the student read each of four sentences in a story and orally complete the missing word using context clues and prediction skills.

RESULTS

Subject I

Dolch Sight Words. The results indicated that at the conclusion of this study, Jimmy read 22 words correctly. Of these, seven were entirely new and did not occur in the LEA stories. Table 1 contains pre and posttest results for both students.

Insert Table 1 About Here

LEA Sight Words. As can be seen from Table 2 the percentage of new words learned increased with each successive story from 62% to 100%. A comprehensive test given at the conclusion of the study revealed that Jimmy retained recognition of 44% of the new words introduced.

Insert Table 2 About Here

Modified Cloze Test. In three of the four stories, Jimmy incorrectly completed one sentence resulting in an accuracy score of 75%. He incorrectly completed two cloze sentences in a fourth story resulting in a score of 50%. Table 3 gives both students' performance on the passages. An analysis of the types of errors Jimmy made revealed that three out of seven errors were implausible and violated the content of the story (e.g. Story 1: text word was heard, student said fingernail). Of the remaining errors, two were plausible and accurate according to the pictures but did not reflect the content of the story. The remaining two errors were repetitions of the words which preceeded the deleted word.

Insert Table 3 About Here

Subject II

Dolch Sight Words. These test results revealed that Bobby had mastered 15 words on the Dolch list. Of these words, five were also contained in the LEA stories. It was also noted that two words recognized on the pretest were not recognized on the posttest.

LEA Sight Words. Table 2 lists the words Bobby mastered from the LEA stories. The percentage of new words learned with each successive story fluctuated from 62% to 50% to 60% and 90% word recognition respectively. While positive effects of the LEA technique were evident, Bobby's sight word mastery was less systematic and less predictable from Story #1 to #4. The comprehensive sight word test revealed that Bobby mastered 31% of all the new words introduced, 13% less than Jimmy.

Modified Cloze Test. Bobby's performance on the modified close task was stronger than on the sight word tasks. As noted in Table 3, he correctly completed two of the four stories and made only one error each in Story #1 and #2. An analysis of the errors revealed that one was a (plausible) substitution in the sentence (e.g. Story 1: text word was beard, student said fur). The second error was plausible up to the point of deletion in the sentence (e.g. Story 2: text word was big, student said skin). Both of these errors indicate a use of context to predict the deleted word and an understanding of the stories and cloze task. Bobby's performance on this task was markedly better than Jimmy's.

DISCUSSION

As a result of this LEA strategy both subjects evidenced improvement in sight word learning and in their ability to use context clues. However, differences in the amount of improvement were noted between them. With regard to the Dolch Word List, Jimmy recognized 15 words prior to the study and 22 words when the study was completed. Similarly, Bobby recognized 6 words prior to the study and 15 when the

was concluded, an increase of 7 and 9 words respectively. It is also worth noting that both subjects failed to recognize a few words in the posttest which were recognized during the pretest. This behavior is not uncommon for emotionally distrubed/behaviorally disordered students; in fact, much of their learning is characterized by inconsistent learning and lack of skill mastery.

This inconsistent performance can also be observed in Table 2, recognition of sight words derived from the LEA stories. Because the LEA stories were constructed using the children's language, the sentence structures were repetitive and the words used across the four stories were similar. In fact, three or four of the words occurred in all four stories thus allowing increased practice in reading them. As noted in the table, the percentage of new words learned increased from Story #1 to #4 suggesting that the subjects became increasingly familiar with the LEA teaching strategies and activities which in turn facilitated the learning of new words in subsequent stories (i.e. practice effect). However, a lack of skill mastery was noted for both students on the comprehensive posttest. While both learned LEA sight words as a result of instruction, neither retained recognition of all new sight words introduced nor retained mastery of all words recognized immediately following instruction as evidenced by their performance on the comprehensive posttest. Overall, Jimmy showed the greatest and consistent growth in sight word learning.

Lastly, performance on the modified cloze sentences distinguished these students considerably. While both gave evidence of the ability to predict deleted words in the sentences, Bobby performed this task with greater accuracy and exhibited consistent use of context and understanding of the task demands. Conversely, Jimmy performed poorly overall. He used fewer context clues and did not appear to understand the concept of a modified cloze sentence as evidenced by his implausible responses.

Although specific procedures for quantifying disruptive behaviors during this

experiment were not operationalized, the teacher reported that Jimmy engaged in numerous teacher attention seeking behaivors. These behaviors frequently took the form of seeking unnecessary help and sharing with the teacher information unrelated to the story or discussion underway. Frequently these behaviors were used to elicit the teacher's attention away from his brother, Bobby. It was also noted that these behaviors dropped off significantly when Jimmy was actively involved in the learning process such as circling words in the story, manipulating sentence strips and completing cloze sentences. They increased when he was asked to take turns or read sight words in isolation. Bobby's disruptive behaviors were far less frequent. The teacher noted that from time to time Bobby would stare into space and remain silent during portions of the lessons. He did experience some difficulty reading the sight word cards and relied heavily upon teacher assistance with this task.

In general, the teacher noted that the students were eager to read their stories to classmates, eager to attend instructional sessions, and eager to initiate this form of instruction with the entire class. While the improvements noted in reading development were sometimes inconsistent and somewhat limited, in just four weeks these improvements surpassed those made in their conventional reading program during a seven month period. In contrast to the behaviors observed in the classroom during conventional reading instruction, the teacher noted less disruptive behavior on the part of the students and increased attention to the LEA tasks.

CONCLUSION

The Language Experience Approach is not novel. Although a limited number of studies are available, it has been documented to be an effective technique with developmental readers as well as such populations as Native Indian Students (Mallett, 1977) potential high school dropouts (Mulligan, 1974) and reading disabled students (Sintra, 1975). Ironically, its use with special populations such as severe learning disabled students, educable mentally retarded individuals and emotionally distrubed/behaviorally disordered children is severely restricted perhaps

due to the dearth of documented evidence regarding its effectiveness with students of special needs. While this study is limited in scope the findings are quite impressive. The LEA strategy has been found to increase not only the children's mastery of sight words, use of context clues and prediction skills, and reading fluency, but also their motivation for learning and attending behaviors. It appears to be a viable alternative to conventional beginning reading instruction, capitalizing on the student's language strengths rather than focusing on his weaknesses. Hopefully the use of LEA strategies to teach reading will become the norm rather than the exception when working with these children of special needs.

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Table 1

Recognition of Dolch Sight Words

	Subject I		Subject II	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
	a	a	a	a
	and	and	big	big
	big	big	funny	funny
	blue	blue	go	-
	go	go	is	-
	help	-	two	two
	I	I		I
	in	in		in
	is	is		one
	look	look		red
	red	red		yellow
	the	the		four
	to	-		have
	two	-		he
	yellow	yellow		has
		it		his
		funny		of
		my		
		at		
		black		
		eat		
		have		
		yes		
		has		
		of		
Total	15	22	6	15

Table 2

Recognition of Language Experience Sight Words

Story 1	Story 2	Story 3	Story 4	Comprehensive post-test
the**	platypus**	Spiderman**	big**	the*
dog*	big**	boots*	candy**	dog*
has**	feet	red**	cane**	has*
four**	one*	mask*	on**	he**
legs	eye*	while**	bell**	a**
a**	fingernails**	web**	back**	big**
black**		out*	yellow**	eye**
nose**		of**	Mr.**	platypus**
he**		his**	E.**	red*
big**		hand	chest*	web*
beard				spiderman**
long				on**
fur*				yellow**
				Mr.**
				E.**
				chest*
				feet*
				mask**
				his**
total new words 13	6	10	10	39
% new words learned *62 **62	*67 **50	*90 **60	*100 ** 90	*44 **31

* words learned by Subject I
** words learned by Subject II

Table 3

Language Experience Stories

Modified Cloze Sentences

The Dog

The dog has four legs. The dog has a black nose. He has a big beard. He has long fur.

* 75%
** 75%

The Platypus

The platypus has a long nose. The platypus has big feet. He has one eye. The platypus has fingernails.

* 75%
** 75%

Spiderman

Spiderman has Spiderman boots. Spiderman has a red mask. He has white eyes. Spiderman has a web out of his hand.

* 50%
**100%

The Red Tornado

He has a big candy cane on. He has a bell on his back. He has yellow hands. He has Mr. E. on his chest.

* 75%
**100%

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* Subject I modified cloze performance

** Subject II modified cloze performance

FOOTNOTE

The authors would like to thank Ms. Karen Holliday and Ms. Lisa Nissenbaum Schell for their assistance tabulating results and examining the students' behaviors.